

## TREATMENT OF WOMEN LIBERATION IN THE NOVELS OF SHOBHA DE: A SOCIO-LINGUISTIC OUTLOOK

DR. RAJESH KUMAR SINHA

**Abstract:** Shobha De, an extremely vocal author, autobiographer and columnist of India has already carved a big niche for herself in the realm of Indian English Writing. She has written both fiction and non-fiction depicting the longings of Indian women who, in general, are the victims of patriarchal set up of society. Specially, her novels are heroine oriented and these heroines often break out of the barriers of the society to assert their rights, hardly caring for their future. The present paper intends to study treatment of women liberation in Shobha De's novels with a socio-linguistic approach. The paper will also bring into focus the various shades of Indian women as portrayed in De's novels. Under the impact of globalization Indian human psyche is too changing rapidly. Naturally, Indian women are also trying to come out of the dark cobweb and this is something that Mrs. De has delineated truthfully in her novels.

**Introduction:** It is a matter of pride for all Indians that during past one hundred years English Literature has been enriched so vigorously by different kinds of Indian authors in all its genres that Indian English Literature has carved its own niche in the realm of Literature on the whole. Sri Aurobindo, Ravindra Nath Tagore, Toru Dutt, Sarojini Naidu, R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, Amita Desai, Kiran Desai, Arvind Agida, Amitabh Ghosh, Manju Kapoor, Nayan Tara Sehgal, Khushwant Singh and Shobha De are just a few names who have not only been read in India but also abroad and they have been duly eulogized by the critics across the world. Both Indian and foreign researchers have compiled theses on their works. Apart from them, there are hundreds of Indian English writers who have made their indelible mark by their impressive works. Chetan Bhagat is another best-seller of India today whose novels have been adapted suitably for films too. "Three Idiots" produced by the famous film star Aamir Khan is one such film which is rated among some of the best films of modern Indian cinema. It is based on the story of Chetan Bhagat's highly popular novel "Five Point Someone". The most interesting scenario is that every year some new authors come up with new write-ups which keep on widening the canvas of literature on the whole and Indian English Literature in particular.

So far as Indian English fiction is concerned, it is getting richer day by day. Some modern fiction writers have become role models for many new Indian English novelists and famous among them are

Ravinder Singh, Ritwik Mallik, Sachin Garg, Faraaz Kazi, Durjoy Dulta and Nikita Singh etc.

The extant paper intends to examine the concept of women liberation in the novels of Shobha De. Among the new breed of women writers from India Shobha De is supposed to be highly vociferous for the cause of liberation of women in urban areas. In her various novels she has created different types of women characters who want to lead free life and who fight against the age-long patriarchal system. They seem to break open the barrier created by men around them and breathe in an atmosphere where they are free like butterflies. Her feminine characters are opposed to any kind of marginalization and displacement. She has vividly portrayed the image of new women in all her novels. De has tried to depict the new women as one "who is daring ambitious and aspiring" – be it *Socialite Evenings* or *Stary Nights* or *Sisters* or *Strange Obsession* or *Sultry Days* or *Snapshots* or *Second Thoughts*.

Shobha De's female characters are revolutionary by temperament. They are whole-heartedly feminists. They want to enjoy liberty at any cost. They love to revolt against the family or the society in which they live, if their freedom is at stake. She has herself asserted, "I did write with a great deal of empathy toward women. Without waiving the feminist flag I feel very strongly about the woman's situation" <sup>(1)</sup>. De's female characters go against the traditional practice of exploitation and suppression of women in every walk of life. Her women characters are powerful in true sense of the term. They are bold enough to challenge the age-old male hegemony so far as basic

issues of life are concerned. Apart from normal heterosexual rapports, her novels record pre-marital relationships, post-marital rapports, extra-marital relationships, wild romance and even lesbianism. The concept of neo-woman has been beautifully communicated through the mouth of Swati in Snapshots when she speaks, "We rejoice in our sexuality, we do not suppress it, we do not dismiss it. Sex does not threaten us".<sup>(2)</sup> Thus Shobha De's female protagonists are not only assertive but they are also very strong and pragmatic. Moreover, they are also confessional like Amrita Pritam and Kamla Das who, in their works, have given quite unrestrained and ingenuous accounts of their intimate relationships with different men at different times.

In *Socialite Evenings* Anjali and Karuna walk out of their middle class homes in search of unrestrained freedom and feel no inhibition in establishing extra-marital relationship. Her husband Abe is quite flirtatious by nature and takes pleasure in making carnal relationships everyday with new virgins – well with the support of Anjali herself. On the other hand, Anjali establishes physical contact with an adolescent boy who is young enough to be her son. Later on, she comes close to a French man and then to a gay. Thus, she lives her life on own condition giving priority to men and money. She is also bold enough to confess it when she talks about her physical frolic with Abe this way, "The bhang was working its dangerous magic on everyone. Abe and the women start to lurch drunkenly across a narrow retaining wall along the edge of the property. He was yelling, "why don't you remove your top and I take off my bottom and we become one."<sup>(3)</sup> On the other hand, Karuna has a passive attachment with her husband and, therefore, she gets attached to another man called Krish and finds a typical erotic satisfaction with him. Afterwards, she also comes into a closer contact with Ranbir Roy, a much married journalists. Thus these two women get out of their own social milieu to have total fun and frolick bypassing their marriage. Surprisingly, they also find husbands who do not object to their adventures.

De's another novel *Starry Nights* boldly depicts the journey of a middle class female into film industry who agrees to sacrifice her chastity for the sake of popularity and individual identity. It records the story of Asha Rani who submits herself to big producers and directors, for fame and wealth and, quite

interestingly, her mother (Amma) pushes her forward for this. At one point in the novel she taunts at the film financier Kishenbhai with these words: "you financed and produced my first film Kishenbhai, but you extracted payment from my body."<sup>(4)</sup> This novel portrays a very realistic picture of ultra-modern social fabric of the Indian film industry where women knowingly fall prey to erotic overtures of the famous directors, producers, financiers and actors to fulfil their dreams of earning popularity and fame. Sex is not at all a taboo for them.

Lesbianism finds its best expression in De's another landmark novel *Strange Obsession*. Amrita Aggrawal, a young model, comes to Mumbai to shape up her career. But, as the ill-luck would have it, she is entrapped by a lesbian Meenakshi Aiyengar who persuades her to have homosexual relationship with her. Shobha De, through this very novel, has tried to justify that lesbianism in Indian society is, though, seen as a taboo, yet there is not everything abnormal in it. In the beginning of her relationship Amrita is quite hesitant but, in course of time, she begins to enjoy the company of Meenakshi whom everyone called Minx. Minx played the male part while Amrita played the female one in their lesbian relationship. Shobha De has depicted their erotic unions at many places in the novel but the following one example is enough to how Amrita enjoyed being with Minx in the bed: "Minx removed her clothes one by one and placed them neatly on a chair close to the bed. Amrita was suddenly conscious, very conscious, of Minx's touch as each nerve ending in her body came alive under her probing finger and tongue. The crickets outside her window set up a noisy chorus as Amrita struggled not to lose herself entirely to what was happening to her."<sup>(5)</sup> Thus, in this novel, De has deftly handled to issue to lesbianism and has tried to establish that it is just a diversion of heterosexuality. Here, it would also be relevant to record that lesbianism is not new to Indian society. It has been in practice since time immemorial. The great author Vatsyayan has written in the fourteenth chapters of *Kamasutra*:

*Some women of the harem*

*When they are amorous,*

*Do the acts of mouth congress*

*On the yonis of one another.*<sup>(6)</sup>

This way, Shobha De's handling of the theme of woman-woman relationship is not only licenced, rather it deserves accolades. Today, LGBTs are

fighting for their rights world over and in many countries they have been accepted as normal beings. In the light of this fact, De has actually taken a forward step.

Shobha De believes that economic independence is a must for the neo-women of India. Unless and until she is financially strong, she cannot feel liberated and cannot opt out of the institution of marriage if the husband is exploitative or unco-operative & impotent by nature. In her another novel *Second Thoughts* she writes, "Eventually, everything boils down to money, the great leveller. There can be no talk of independence for women without economic self-sufficiency. An independent mind or free-spirit is meaningless so long as the body and soul are being kept together by somebody else."<sup>(7)</sup> Commenting on De's approach towards new Indian women specially belonging to high-society urban milieu a well-known critic L. Sonia Ningthousam writes, "De's women work to make themselves economically independent. They are usually well-established women with high profile careers, They are not afraid to take up challenges to achieve their desired goals. Marriage is not regarded as essential to their advancement by these women. On the contrary marriages are treated as mere games of catching rich grooms which can be thrown away once they becomes non-functional or do not yield economic benefits or becomes hinderances in achieving their desired goals."<sup>(8)</sup>

Thus, Shobha De is one such female author in Indian English Writing who is fighting for the cause of women who find themselves in shades of slavery under male chauvinism. She is creating characters who are constantly fighting for equal rights bypassing those shackles. Today, specially in metros, Women of high society in India are definitely coming out of old situations of family life and are loving to remain single, or single mothers or even leading a live-in relationship of their choices. Following their footsteps a good chunk of women in smaller cities and even burgeoning villages are fighting for equal rights knowing well their duties too. In one of her non-fiction Shobha De has acknowledged this in following words:

*"Eventually every relationship is a power struggle either on an overt or subliminal level... control over situation has been male prerogative over the centuries, women's destinies have been determined largely in that context alone... It is time they were made aware of*

*their own potential and power. Shakti needs to be harnessed, directed and explored for the furtherness of overall human development... Men will have to come to terms with women power."*<sup>(9)</sup>

Thus, Shobha De believes that modern Indian women must be aware of their Shakti (power) so as to claim their individuality. The women novelists like Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sehgal, Kamla Markandaya and Kiran Desai etc. have also painted women characters in their novels, but many of them are either traditional or succumb to the pressures of male dominance. Before Shobha De, it was only R.P. Jhabwala who has dared to depict such female characters in her novels who rebel against the situations which are not congenial. Shobha De has forwarded the trend set by R.P. Jhabwala to a new height and has given a new voice to Indian women on the whole.

This way a solid conclusion can be made that De has, to a large extent, succeeded in projecting the concept of the neo-woman (or popularly called new woman) through her novels. Her novels would certainly be eye openers for many Indian women who have to sacrifice their longings for man's desire for power and sex. Dr. Sudhir Kumar, a critic of Shobha De, aptly opines:

*"Shobha De believes in the fact that nobody has liked to look backward and think about such things which would harm the free development of human personality in the age of modernity. Traditional and cultural values have become the matter of individual beliefs and individual thinking... She believes the fact that everything is in the state of transformation and it is impossible for the people living in modernity to stick to set doctrines and dogmas."*<sup>(10)</sup>

This way the concept of new woman in Shobha De's novels would certainly bring about a drastic change in the mindset of urban Indian woman in long run and help them become free from undue shackles imposed on them by patriarchal society. The language of the novels also echo the inner desire of the freedom of women characters and sometimes it has become abusive too. Abusive language often comes out when there is outburst of feelings. Such a language speaks a lot about the psyche of character and, hence, use of such language is wholly justified. Thus, it can be concluded that Shobha De is one of the fore-runners of women liberation movement in India today.

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Dr. Rajesh Kumar Sinha/ Associate Professor/P.G. Deptt. of English/  
S.P. Jain College/ Sasaram/ Bihar/Mobile : 9135088514/ [rksinha1963@gmail.com](mailto:rksinha1963@gmail.com)